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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, LONDON FOR MILLER, PARIS FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL LEGISLATION ROUNDUP: BABY STEPS TO EXPANDING CIVIL SOCIETY?

REF: DAMASCUS 474

Classified By: CDA, a.i., Raymond D. Maxwell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: Three changes or proposed changes to Syrian law recently have sparked uncharacteristically vocal public debate and have created a rare space for dialogue on a few civil issues. Increased penalties for honor killings, the "personal status" draft law, and a workers' rights bill have all drawn telling reactions from civil society and labor activists. End Summary.

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Repeal of Honor Crimes Protection  
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**¶2.** (SBU) President Bashar al-Assad recently repealed part of the legal protection of honor killings after a concerted effort by women's rights groups to raise public awareness about the issues. While the old law pardoned honor killings, Asad's decree require a minimum sentence of two years for the crime (though honor killing is still not legally classified as a form of murder. The Ministry of Interior estimates close to 300 honor killings are committed every year, mostly in rural communities, although officials noted the actual figure was probably higher because such crimes are often not reported.

**¶3.** (SBU) Many activist groups have publically criticized the new law for not going far enough. The president of the Syrian Women's Observatory said the new law still "invites murder" and pledged to continue to fight for full repeal. Many contacts, however, contend the law is a "step in the right direction" and should be seen as part of a long-term effort to address the issue of honor killings.

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Labor Bill  
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**¶4.** (SBU) The Syrian Cabinet, led by PM Muhammad Naji al-Utri, has approved the final version of a new labor bill that would, among other reforms, require a pre-employment contract to ease restrictions on firing long-term employees. The proposal has pitted labor unions against struggling public and private industries.

**¶5.** (SBU) Under current Syria law, it is practically impossible to fire an employee after s/he has been working for a company for more than one year. Government officials and business leaders have said the private and public sectors suffer from overstaffing and low wages, and business leaders have complained of poor motivation at work by some veteran workers who must be seduced financially into retirement. To avoid these restrictions, many Syrian employers force workers

to sign their contract and resignation letter simultaneously, allowing them to dismiss employees at will.

¶16. (C) PM Utri, who normally avoids taking controversial stands on domestic issues, told state-run media the new labor bill was drafted with the participation of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), the quasi-governmental umbrella organizations of most Syrian labor unions. The president of the GFTU is a member of the powerful Syrian Regional Command, the executive body of the Ba'ath Party. According to Embassy sources, the GFTU president is informally appointed by the Party and is seen as a rubber stamp for government policies.

¶17. (C) In debate over the bill, many Syrians complained the GFTU does not adequately represent the interests of Syrian workers. Several local and international media have reported the unions expressed opposition to the bill over concerns it would encourage unfair firing and empower employers to write a pre-employment contract without input from employees.

¶18. (C) The labor unions have not publically proposed an alternative; rather, they support the status quo. The new labor bill surfaced two years ago but was postponed until now due to the labor opposition. The public disagreement over the has generated a high volume of public debate, pitting economic reform advocates against labor and Ba'ath Party traditionalists. The SARG, which in the past has deferred reform laws when facing widespread dissent, remains solidly behind the bill, but also allows free debate on its merits.

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Personal Status Bill  
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¶19. (C) The labor bill's resurrection coincides with the introduction of a controversial draft revision to the new "personal status" law that many in the human rights and legal communities view as a major step backward for gender and religious rights (ref). While a variety of Embassy sources claim the draft law has been pulled, others say it remains under consideration. Civil society activist Daad Mousa (strictly protect) said elements in the SARG want to keep the bill alive in order to distract civil society activists from other controversial issues, such as the labor bill.

¶110. (SBU) Public reactions to the bill have been strongly negative. Versions of the bill were leaked to civil society activists and the unions, but we have been unable to obtain a copy. Rumor and speculation might have distorted the actual wording of the draft laws, but the overwhelming response has been against this proposal.

¶111. (C) Comment: In the short span of a few months, we have seen a marked increase in public debate on domestic social and economic issues. In some cases, such as the controversial personal status law, criticism has been sharply focused on the SARG's inability to control what many view as a campaign to impose religious values on a legally secular state. The government's prompt response indicates sensitivity to public opinion and perhaps a growing government tolerance of dissent on selected issues. The presence of civil society in Syria remains largely a rare phenomenon, but debate on labor, social, and even criminal issues suggests non-state actors are establishing a small foothold in the public sphere.

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